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## Reflections on Dean Feerick's Leadership

### Cover Page Footnote

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## REFLECTIONS ON DEAN FEERICK'S LEADERSHIP

*Michael M. Martin\**

Writing a tribute to Dean John Feerick isn't as easy as you might think. The problem isn't that one can't find favorable things to say—far from it when the subject is widely known as “John the Good.” And the problem isn't that one can't find enough to say—looking at only the past twenty years, he seems to have combined a full career as Dean of the Fordham Law School with another full career in service to the profession and the public. It's more that John's *modus operandi* is just too modest and self-effacing to provide high drama or amusing anecdotes, and recounting his innumerable good deeds risks taxing the credulity of readers who are not acquainted with him.

My own experience with John began while he was still a partner at Skadden Arps. I spent the 1979-80 academic year on leave from the Law School, teaching at the University of Virginia. One day I received a letter from John telling me that he had been interviewing at Fordham and that he really hoped I would be returning. I was quite impressed with both his thoughtfulness toward me in passing on a student's compliments and his concern for his Law School that led him to assist in trying to retain a teacher who he thought could make a contribution.

That combination of personal touch and commitment to the School has been John's hallmark as we have worked together in various capacities since he became Dean in 1982. One of the first appointments he made was to ask me to be faculty moderator of the *Fordham Law Review*. John has a particular affection for the *Review*. As a second-year student he was the only one of his classmates—and one of the few in the journal's history—to publish two pieces during his year on the staff. That made his selection as Editor-in-Chief of Volume XXIX almost a foregone conclusion. And ever since he has maintained close ties to the *Review*, contributing articles and providing all sorts of support. Having someone around with both his institutional memory and his commitment to the *Review's* excellence helped make my service as moderator a true joy.

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I worked most closely with John during my six years as Associate Dean. That was a unique opportunity to see him "warts and all," but the resulting picture seems incomplete, since the warts turn out to be things like "too concerned about other people" and "not concerned enough about his own health and well-being." Certainly, watching John in action gave me new insights about leadership.

Our usual conception of a leader is someone committed to an objective who, by force of personality or wielding carrots or sticks, gets others to share that commitment and attain that objective. Few would describe John's personality as charismatic, yet in several areas he has exercised this type of leadership quite effectively. Without his commitment to building strong programs in professional responsibility and public service, and his personal involvement and encouragement toward that end, there is no way Fordham would have its national reputation for those programs. Similarly, the Law School's unique initiatives in Ireland and Northern Ireland—the people-to-people dispute resolution program and the summer session with Queen's Belfast and University College Dublin—owe their existence and success to John's pushing and prodding and scrounging.

John Feerick is not just the usual sort of leader, however. The common variety of leadership may constrain the followers to achieving only those objectives established by the leader. What sets John apart is his ability to lead people to accomplish beyond any objective he might set and even beyond anything of which they think themselves capable. I do not believe that the national recognition the Law School has gained over the past twenty years has come primarily because John has set objectives for such matters as faculty hiring, scholarly productivity, or high quality and diverse student body and then led us toward accomplishing those objectives. Rather, he has made excellence the goal and has left the details of excellence up to each person and group, offering them his support and encouragement. The power of his leadership comes from his example—what he expects from himself in terms of standards, effort, and commitment—as well as from his ability to see the best that is in every person. Some would say that his obvious faith that people will live up to their best is naive, but for those in John's orbit it is a mighty confidence builder and motivator. The resulting belief that nothing is beyond the Law School's potential has been reinforced by John's tireless efforts to develop the resources required to support a wide variety of initiatives.

John's talent for leadership has been recognized outside the Law School, most notably by the Association for the Bar of the City of New York, which he served as President during 1992-94. Beyond that, he has been given numerous public and professional assignments because of his intelligence, absolute integrity, ability to keep people with seriously opposed interests working together, and (I've always thought) willingness to undertake thankless tasks that lesser mortals

would not touch. His assignments have involved issues in business, e.g., as arbitrator for the National Basketball Association; education, e.g., as chair of the ABA Section on Legal Education Standards Review Committee; and politics, e.g., working on committees dealing with presidential succession and chairing New York State committees on government integrity and cameras in the courts.

As I see it, the key to John's success is that he genuinely cares about people. I'm told that as a law student he not only typed up his class notes every day, but also offered the typed notes to his classmates—and that was the days before Xerox machines and computers! Nowadays, no matter how busy he is as Dean, John is never too busy to help anybody in the community with a personal problem. He spends hundreds (more likely, thousands) of hours a year assisting students and alums with their careers. He shows up for weddings and wakes, and I once heard his assistant at the time estimate he attended at least seventy funerals annually. And he does all this not for the recognition or because "it is his job" or because it will pay off in gifts to the Law School, but because he personally relates to every member of the Fordham community.

That kind of concern is contagious. When students speak of "friendly Fordham" they do so with pride, not with sarcasm. Guidebooks, as well as faculty, remark on students' good feelings about the place. The ABA site visitation team last year commented that they had never seen such high morale among a school's administrators. And the tone set by the Dean even affects the notoriously independent faculty, inspiring them to greater service to the students and caring regard for each other.

John is quiet and understanding—often to a fault—but I have seen there are lines one just cannot cross. Usually these involve failing his high standards for interpersonal relations or acting irresponsibly toward the Law School or the profession; his manner stiffens in an expression of profound disappointment and no one can doubt that he is upset. Yet even in these situations, John (sometimes to the dismay of third parties) expresses his concern for the person he is dealing with by not exposing the person to public shame.

All of us at Fordham Law School have been fortunate to have John Feerick as our leader for the past twenty years. I consider myself specially blessed to have worked closely with him for a portion of that time. I hope that we shall all continue to profit by his example and his friendship for many years to come, as he begins the next stage in his relationship with Fordham.

## *Notes & Observations*